THE GIFT
DECEMBER 18, 2011

JOHN BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 89:1-4
Luke 2:1-20

"Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place."
Luke 2:15 (NRSV)

Every year at about this time, one week before Christmas, the pressure mounts and many of us begin to worry, obsess actually, about shopping. Have we done enough? Have we purchased the right gifts for each person on our list? Will the postal service come through and deliver them on time? Are they wrapped beautifully enough? Some people I know, consummate Type A people, so organized and efficient that they have and completed their shopping early, online, and are sitting back this morning with a satisfied smile on their faces, looking at the rest of us smugly. You know who you are. Others of us, the ones with nerves of steel, haven't even started yet, won't start until later in the week, some will wait until the last day, the 24th, late in the afternoon and discover that the crowds are gone, stores are empty and the clerks happy to see them. Most of us are between those fortunate extremes and find ourselves, for a month or so, spending a lot of time thinking about, worrying about Christmas shopping.

Several years ago the New York Times published a feature article which I clipped and tucked into my Christmas file, "The Card-Carrying Angst of the Dysfunctional Shopper" and referred to "Shopping Disorder," the sad and sometimes tragic practice of over-spending at Christmas and then wallowing in guilt. The article said there are psychiatrists who specialize in treating the condition.

It can be bothersome, annoying, stressful and leave you exhausted and broke. It can also be joyful, deeply satisfying, and lots of fun. And beneath it all is something very important, something essential to our humanness – learning to give.

If you are fortunate you learned to give early in your life. One of my favorite Christmas memories is about the time I learned of the joy and excitement of giving. I must have been thirteen or fourteen because I had a paper route and a few dollars in my pocket. My mother took my little brother and me along Christmas shopping to find a pocket watch for my father, the kind that rail roaders used, a large pocket watch with a clear face, fastened to a chain and worn in a watch pocket. Men's vests used to have a small pocket for your pocket watch and maybe still do. It was that watch my father pulled out and in church and looked at when he thought the preacher was going on too long, and to my mother's horror and my delight, would, if the sermon was really long, wind it so that everyone sitting around us could hear. (I'm getting ahead of myself.) My mother took me and my little brother to buy a pocket watch for Dad. Our destination was Seller's Jewelry Store, the finest in town, at the head of a stairway above the bank. I had never been in Seller's before. I recall the deep blue carpet on the stairway and in the glittering showroom with cases full of jewelry, rings and pins and pearl necklaces, and watches, wrist watches and pocket watches of all sizes and prices. Mr. Sellers, himself, waited on us, a tall, white-haired man in a blue suit. I was impressed that he knew my mother's name.

Mr. Sellers showed us the pocket watches and we focused on one. It must have been more expensive than my mother's budget. She told Mr. Sellers that we would have to think about it, although I now think she staged the whole thing to teach us a lesson. Down the blue carpeted stairway we went, out onto the sidewalk for a conference. "That's the watch he would want," she said. But it is expensive. So let's buy it together. Prior to that my gifts for him were pretty much the same every year – blue work hankies, and a package of Gillette razor blades. This was a whole new level, a pocket watch from Seller's jewelry store! So I dug in my pocket and contributed a few dollars. My brother, who was six or seven at the time, I think, put in fifty cents. "All right," she said. "Now we have enough" and back up the stairs we went and bought the watch. We were thrilled and with great excitement we waited, all three of us, to present it to my father on Christmas morning. It wasn't the only time, of course, but I do recall it fondly as an occasion when I discovered, or was taught, the joy of giving. The watch continues to be a reality for my younger brother and me. When my father died, my mother put his work pocket watch in a glass dome and it sat on her book shelf. When she died, and I still don't know how this happened, my brother ended up with Dad's watch, which he still has and I

remind him regularly of the simple injustice of it – how over the top his return is on his pathetic investment. He is, to this day, unmoved and has not yet returned the watch.

It is a gift I will never forget giving. And the best gifts I have received also reflect something of the giver and were always presented with great excitement and anticipation: plaster of paris hand prints, a popsicle stick pencil holder I kept on my desk for years, a Christmas ornament with the second grade picture of my son on it, front teeth missing.

The pocket watch was certainly a practical gift, but sometimes the best gifts are totally impractical, whimsical, fun. Someone told me recently that in her home her mother had a rule: no appliances for Christmas. I still shudder to recall that I once gave, for a Christmas gift, an electric knife, and another time an electric mixer.

The favorite Christmas song, The Twelve Days of Christmas, celebrates the happiness and mirth (isn't it wonderful to be able to use the word "mirth" at Christmas?) and pure fun of impractical gifts… "A Partridge in a Pear Tree, Two Turtle Doves, Three French Hens, Ladies Dancing, Lords a Leaping, Pipers Piping, and twelve Drummers Drumming" – not a practical gift in there anywhere. But perhaps, a deeper wisdom – of true love and its wonderfully, impractical, extravagant generosity.

There is a deep truth here. When the first years of the Common Era dawned, 2000 years ago, what God's people wanted was consummately practical. They wanted a military and political leader, a charismatic revolutionary who would throw off the yoke of the hated Romans. All they had known was oppression, the utter lack of freedom and dignity and self-determination. They were God's people after all. And the Roman governor, the officious Roman functionaries, the Roman soldiers walking their streets, bullying, eyeing their women, turning violent at the slightest provocation, were only the most recent of their occupiers and oppressors going all the way back to Babylon, five centuries before. They wanted a Messiah to come and save them and by that they meant someone like David, or Judas Maccabeus whose successful revolt is celebrated at Hanukah, who would rally and organize and attack and push the Romans and their laws and taxes and chariots and swords and helmets and their arrogance – into the Sea.

They longed for, yearned for, prayed for the Messiah promised by God, to come and save them and set them free.

And it is the great paradox of our history, that when God came, it was not in the way they expected nor wanted nor prayed for. It was in an infant, a newborn, the essence of weakness and vulnerability – but also the one human reality that universally calls out of everyone who witnesses it, participates in it – love, a love that was not there before. It was a gift I received five times, with the birth, and each time the baby, simply by showing up, created something new – a love in my heart that hadn't been there before.

Scottish poet, George MacDonald:

> They were all looking for a king
> To slay their foes and lift them high:
> Though cam'st, a little baby thing
> To make a woman cry

You know, there is a sense in which we still want a God who will powerfully intercede in human affairs, and our personal affairs, to put things right, to bring peace to the world, to establish justice in our city, to heal our diseases and make us whole. We still, some of us at least, want a practical god, a useful god, a god who is good for something, a divine intercession that will help us with our career, sell our condo or find a parking place. And the stunning assertion of Christmas is that God does come to help us, save us, set us free – by calling love out of us. The Stunning assertion of Christmas is that God does come to establish justice in our community, fairness in our economic and social structures, even peace in the world – not by an iron fist, not by imperial fiat, not by a list of rules, but by love, by giving us the gift we truly need, the ability to love and to give, and then, to do it – work to establish justice and fairness and peace – you and me – because we know ourselves to be loved and called to live out that love every day of our lives.

The late Langdon Gilkey who taught theology at the University of Chicago… "To be enabled to love is the greatest gift that can be given to us, even more enhancing of the strengths of the self than being loved." [Message and Existence p.203]

We have learned that our fragile grip on life depends on love. We know now that infants need human touch, human presence, holding, cradling, caressing, singing – as desperately as they need food and drink. Christmas reminds us that as desperately we need to be loved to survive, we need – even more – to love and to give – in order to be human; more than survival, to be the men and women and children God has created us to be. "I am convinced that the only hell there is," Dostoyevsky said, "is the inability to love."

That is the hell Christ came to save us from. And that is the wholeness, the happiness, the joy, the salvation, God gives us in the birth of the child.

I was struck last week, as I was thinking about this sermon, and at the same time worrying and obsessing about shopping and buying and wrapping and mailing, that there is a fascinating drama playing out in Switzerland, near Geneva. A very distinguished group of scientists has gathered to observe and study the results of an experiment at the Large Hadron Collider. I don't begin to understand it, but apparently, microscopic particles are hurled at each other at nearly the speed of light and when they collide interesting things happen. This experiment is pursuing something called the Higgs Boson, a field thought to permeate the universe, and the reason matter obtained mass after the Big Bang. No preacher casting about for a sermon idea could resist the headline in the paper last week, "God Particle on Trial". The scientists don't like the term, but "according to the theory, it (the Higgs Boson) was the agent that made the stars, planets and life possible by giving mass to the most elementary particles, the building blocks of the universe… Without it, particles would just have remained whizzing around the universe at the speed of light." [Chicago Tribune 12/14/11]

Thus, the "God particle."

And it simply occurred to me, that while this fascinating, mind stretching experiment is going on, attempting to get at the very heart of reality – we Christians are pondering that very same thing – the heart of reality, the essence of who we are and what human history is about and what you and I are about and why we are here – and it is the child, that newborn infant, the gift of the love of God born into our midst – that both defines us and that tells us why we are here and how to live.

You have heard me refer to Frederick Buechner many times over the years. He is an author and a Presbyterian minister and his essays, articles, sermons and novels have informed and shaped the thinking of many of us.

Buechner wrote a novel once about Brendan, a sixth century Irish saint, Brendan the Navigator, who spent his life sailing in a little boat looking for paradise – which he believed was out beyond the horizon. Near the end of his life, Brendan has an audience with the revered Welsh monk and mystic, Gildas. They talk a long time about the paradise that lies beyond the horizon and Brendan's failure to reach it. As Brendan is about to leave, Gildas stands up –

"For the first time we saw that Gildas wanted one leg. It was gone from the knee down. He was hopping sideways to reach for the stick in the corner when he lost his balance. He would have fallen in a heap if Brendan hadn't leapt forward and caught him."

"I'm as crippled as the dark world," Gildas said.

"If it comes to that, which of us isn't, my dear?" Brendan said.

"The truth of what Brendan had said stopped all our mouths. We were cripples, all of us. For a moment or two, there was no sound but the bees."

"To lend each other a hand, when we're falling," Brendan said, "perhaps that's the only work that matters in the end."

"To be enabled to love is the greatest gift given to us," the distinguished theologian said.

To be taught to give, enabled to give, is the highest and holiest of our humanity.

And God set about to do it in the birth of a child.

Amen